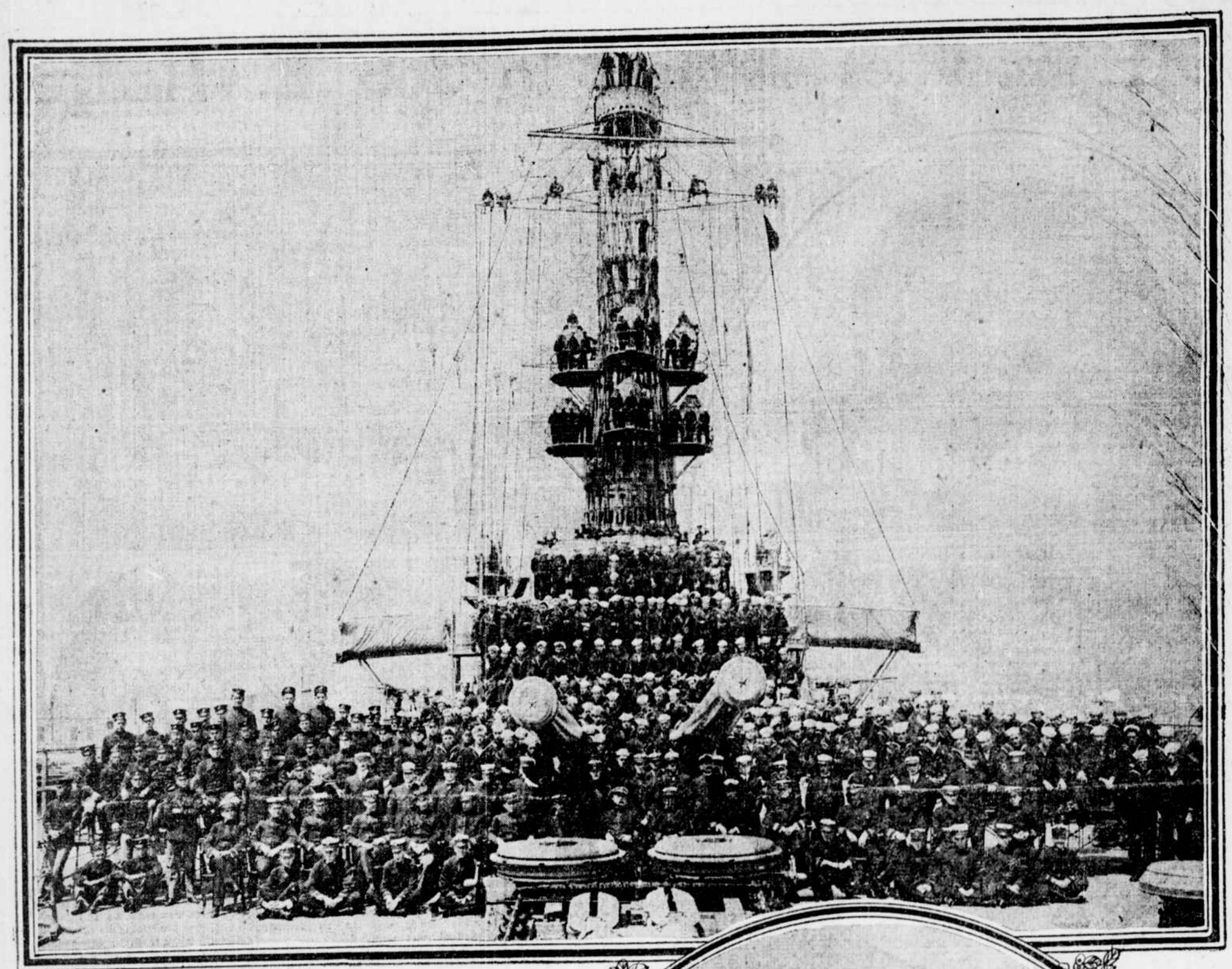
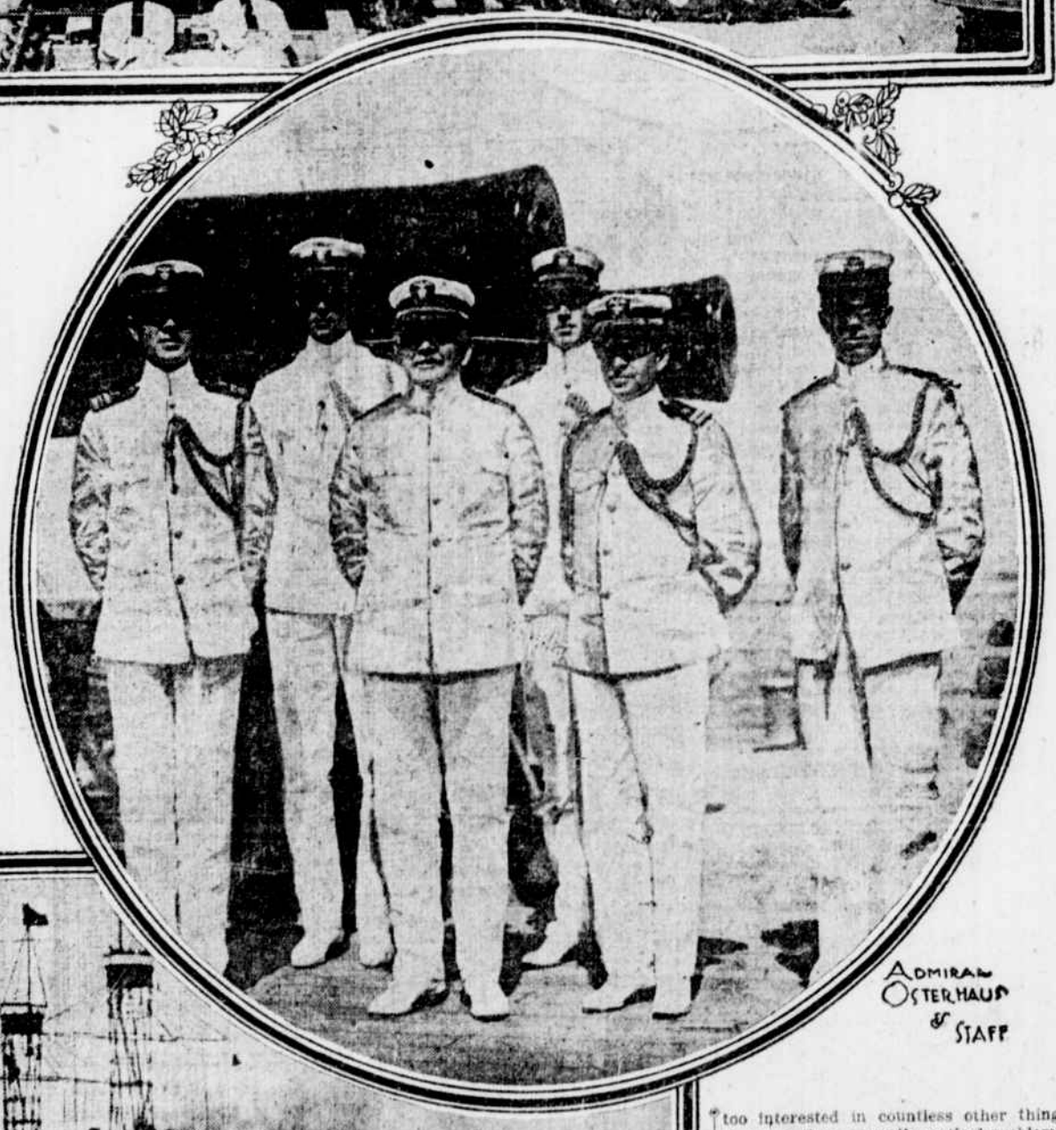
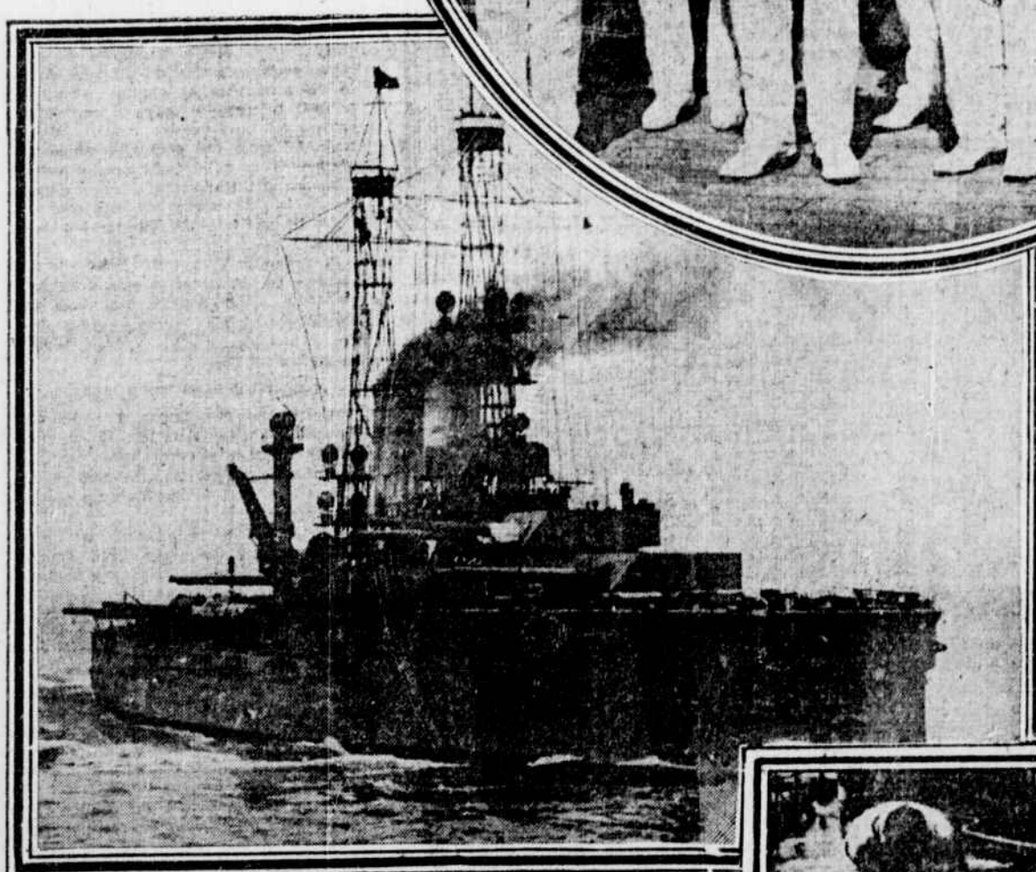
Out on the Range Where the Great Ships of War Sharpen Their Eyesight



OFFICERS & CREW OF U.S.S. FLORIDA



ADMIRAL OSTERHAUS & STAFF



U.S.S. FLORIDA UNDER WAY © BY INTERNATIONAL NEWS

A Short Time Ago Many of the Battleships Which Will Gather Here This Week Were Thundering Off the Virginia Capes—Just What They Did and How They Did It Form the Subject Matter of This Story.

THE grim, gray line of war vessels to be assembled in the North River this week will represent a fabulous sum of money. To the average taxpayer, confronted with the high cost of living, and who, through force of circumstances, bases his sense of values solely on the gold standard, it might be interesting to know just how many times the earth could be girdled with an imaginary ribbon made of the one dollar bills representing the cost of the one hundred and twenty-three vessels constituting the fleet. But monetary values are of only incidental interest and importance in this story.

Many thousands of visitors will swarm over the sides of these fighting ships of ours, look them over complacently, be duly impressed, go away with a slightly more arched chest and a self-administered pat on the back, feeling, perhaps, and even admitting to their friends, that "our navy does us credit," and let it go at that. But if you, Mr. New Yorker, or Mr. Anywhere Else, are suffering from torpidity of patriotism, take advantage of the opportunity offered you while these war vessels are in our harbor and study them carefully.

If you are a keen observer of either men or things you will not be aboard one of these ships very long before the red corpuscles of your blood will be dancing merrily up and down your spine, for a battleship, with its thousands of interesting features and its crew of approximately nine hundred sound, able-bodied American citizens, offers to any one possessed of even quiescent, patriotic impulses an object lesson long to be remembered.

Efficiency and enthusiasm have never been co-related by the etymologists, but among the officers and men constituting the personnel of the fleet these two simple English words seem to be inseparable and may be accurately designated as their creed. But in order to learn well the lesson and meaning of these huge floating steel forts, one should go to sea aboard one of them and see what American ingenuity can actually accomplish.

WITH THE FLEET AT PRACTICE.

The writer recently had the opportunity of spending a week aboard the United States battleship Florida while the fleet's target practice was in progress on the Southern drill ground, off the Virginia Capes. Having received the necessary permission from the Secretary of the Navy, he proceeded to Old Point Comfort, where he boarded the converted yacht Yankton to be taken to the fleet about forty miles at sea.

The Yankton is not the most comfortable ship of the navy under ideal conditions, but going to sea aboard her in the teeth of a forty-mile gale is an experience which may conservatively be termed impressive.

Having aboard as shipmates about fifty naval officers assigned to the fleet as umpires and observers during target practice, one was, of course, justified in expecting diversion; and one was not disappointed, for among the passengers were quite a number of officers the major part of whose service at sea had been on ships of the dreadnought class, which are notably steady in the roughest sea.

Yankton, however, is a small vessel ...ess than one thousand tons' displacement. When she put her nose outside the Capes a racing shell could not have pitched and tossed more violently.

It was not very long before some of the players in the auction bridge games, which had been arranged on the pier at Old Point, began to lose interest in their bidding and other points of their hands, and, though the rain was coming down in sheets, the comfort and seclusion of the officers' cabins gradually became less tempting, and the lee rail seemed to be the point of rendezvous agreed upon, subconsciously perhaps, by many.

Efficiency immediately asserted itself; several of the younger officers gave the most efficient exhibition of seasickness one could wish to witness and hope to forget.

After about seven hours of tossing viciously between sea and sky the fleet was overtaken, and the business of being transferred to different ships began. Scaling a sea ladder in a storm offers many surprises to the uninitiated, none of which is greater than the comfort of finding one's self aboard a practically motionless ship after the nerve racking discomfort of the bobbing, dripping Yankton, for once aboard the Florida the joyful discovery is made that she is as steady in a storm as the public library at 42d street and Fifth avenue.

Upon being ushered into the wardroom the landsman is immediately impressed with the simplicity of the living quarters of the officers of our navy. With the exception of the dining table and chairs, all of the furniture is of steel, adequate though unpretentious. Having been assigned to the hospitality of the captain of the marine detachment, whose quarters are to be shared, the writer proceeded to adjust himself to his new surroundings and to prepare for a week of very strenuous work.

Calling on Captain Knapp, formally to make your presence known and present your credentials, is a delightful experience and results in your receiving absolute freedom to go wherever your fancy may direct.

Viewed from the shores of the North River one is impressed with the size of a battleship like the Florida, but if you wish to inspect such a vessel thoroughly you may be surprised to learn that it will require six hours' constant work for three successive days before every part of the ship has been visited.

From shaft alley to maintop and from stem to stern represent distances, areas and altitudes confined within the dimensions of this ship that could be reduced to miles, many of them, if one were not too interested in countless other things to waste time on mathematical problems.

The armament of the Florida consists of ten 12-inch and sixteen 5-inch guns and two 21-inch torpedo tubes. The four 4-inch guns on the bridge are for saluting purposes only. The object of this trip is to observe the firing of these guns at target practice, which is to begin with the use of the 5-inch guns in repelling an imaginary attack by torpedo boats at night.

It is claimed by many writers that the romance of the sea disapeared with the old sailing war vessel. But it is impossible to imagine anything more romantic or poetic than the modern battleship firing at distant targets which look like a row of miladi's kerchiefs silhouetted against the blackness of the night by the rays of powerful searchlights.

Steaming at a speed of ten knots the division of four ships in column approaches in a parallel direction the target raft, about two miles distant, which is being towed on the "starboard hand" by a tug at a speed of five knots. When in the proper position the last ship of the division sheers to starboard and continues its speed, while the three other ships reduce their speed to five knots.

The firing ship approaches the range, which is considered to have been entered when the targets bear 27½ degrees forward of the starboard beam. The range being only 2,000 yards, the firing ship comes up between the target and the remainder of the division. The attention of every one is concentrated on both the ship and the target.

Having entered the range, four red signal lights are flashed and a short blast of the whistle indicates that the order "Commence firing" has been given from the bridge. There is a sudden flash of a lurid silver hue that seems to spill out of the muzzle of the gun, and almost instantly a cloud of white spume and spray rises, mountain-high, in the rear of the target.

If your binoculars are good and you are not too excited, you will observe a tiny hole in the canvas screen which has been the objective of the gun-pointer, for a hit is scored.

The leading ships of the division having reduced their speed, the firing ship gradually overtakes them, and as she passes a picture is presented that defies adequate description. Silhouetted against the beams of her own searchlights of many thousand candle power, this gray-bodied monster seems to be exactly what she is—a grim, determined instrument of death. The picture is impressive, fascinating. If one should attempt to depict on canvas a graphic impression of this inspiring scene, it is quite possible that such a picture would be considered ridiculously impressionistic.

THE TURN OF THE NEXT SHIP.

Having fired the required number of shots for that run, the firing ship turns to starboard and goes nearer the targets, so that the umpires and spotters may observe at shorter range the results of the firing. This having been done, it takes its position at the head of the column, the targets are repaired, and new screens stretched on the booms by repair parties, in the small boats that are towed by tug, about three hundred yards astern of the targets. The necessary repairs completed, the towing ship signals that all is in readiness for the next run, which happens to be the ship the writer is on.

Approaching the range as indicated for the preceding ship, the bridge, occupied by the captain and navigating officer, is an interesting spot. Beginning well astern of the target, the captain will frequently be heard to command "Stand by." After an interval of a few seconds he further commands "Report." The quartermaster, reading the compass, reports the bearing which indicates the number of degrees the target may be forward of the beam. Simultaneously an officer at the range finder reports with absolute accuracy the number of yards of open water between the ship and the target raft. By adjusting his course with these data as a guide the ship is brought into the exact position defined by regulations as the beginning of the range. In the mean time the targets have been picked up by the searchlights, and one is inclined to feel somewhat sorry for their seeming white innocence in view of what will soon happen to them.

WITH THE RANGE FINDERS.

As the last reading of the range finder and compass indicates that the ship will soon be on the range, and desiring to observe the firing from as many points of view as possible, we leave the bridge and hurry to the forward 5-inch gun in the wardroom. There the crew (all interested and determined young Americans) is in readiness for the command "Load."

The gun pointers, one on either side of the gun, have their foreheads pressed against the rubber hood of their telescopic sights, securely fastened in the glass field of which is a vertical hair line, intersected at the exact centre by a similar line on a horizontal plane. The pointer on the left of the gun, by turning two brass wheels, controls the elevation of the muzzle. The pointer on the right, by a similar process, controls the movement of the muzzle to the right or left. Attached to the grip of the controlling device operated by the pointer responsible for elevation there is an electric button, and when the intersecting point of the two hair lines of the sight is centred on the target the button is pressed and the gun is fired.

The range is transmitted by telephone from the spotter or range finder up on deck to the sight setter, who is one of the gun's crew. On a dial immediately in front of his position are indicated the various ranges. The range being communicated to him, the sight is set to correspond. At the command "Load!" the crew, which has been standing at statue-like attention, moves with lightning rapidity. The breech is thrown open, and with admirable accuracy a shell is thrust home, followed immediately by a brass powder case. It seems as if the hands of the man handling this powder case would surely be crushed by the breech block, which seemingly is moving home with as great rapidity as does the powder case. Team work and drill, however, seem to have overcome this possibility.

There is a blinding flash and roar and the gun darts back. One thinks that the bolts holding it to its platform on the deck will surely give under the strain. The recoil is terrifying, yet the interval of time between the discharge of the gun and before it is again "in battery" is but a minute fraction of a second. The breech is flung open once more, and upon hearing the exclamations of the observers around the gun the crew knows it has made a hit. Sights are corrected, for the ship is moving at ten knots, and the procedure is repeated.

As the gun is being loaded for the third time it becomes apparent that there is some difficulty in getting the shell home. A rammer is brought into play, and an effort is made to force the shell into its proper place in the breech. This is soon discovered to be impossible. Something is wrong. It is a crucial moment, as every second of time counts, and unless the gun pointers of that crew score the required number of hits within a given time they fail to qualify for their rating, thereby losing the $10 a month extra pay which would otherwise be allowed them.

Although time is pressing and every member of the crew is alive with anxiety to fire the string of shots there is no confusion or excitement. The splendid discipline and training of the crew assert themselves, and only such men as may have duties in connection with a jammed shell move from their allotted positions. The excitement is confined to the umpires and observers, who realize that the precious seconds are rapidly being ticked off and the ship is moving out of range.

"CUP" PUT GUN OUT OF ACTION.

The hopelessness of the case is at last conceded and the gun is declared out of action. The muzzle is elevated to its extreme height alongside the ship and the proper instrument inserted in the muzzle and the jammed shell ejected. It is discovered that an accident never before known in the history of the navy has occurred. Upon removing the shell it was found that the mouth cup of the powder case used in the previous discharge did not leave the gun, but jammed in the bore. This, of course, reduced the size of the bore to such an extent that when the next shell was inserted it jammed, as has been described. It is the discovery of such defects as this in ammunition and equipment which is one of the objects of target practice.

It was more than impressive to note the splendid self-control exercised by the individual members of this gun crew in this very trying situation, for according to regulations they would not have another opportunity to fire another string by which they may earn their qualification. Though the fault was not their own, they must philosophically accept the result as "a rub of the green."

The first run of our ship being over, we take our place at the head of the column, there to observe the firing of the two remaining ships and await our turn to fire the remaining 5-inch guns in the starboard battery.

ANOTHER LURID BLAST.

Taking a position directly above but in the rear of the first gun to be fired on the next run, one may be prepared for strange and thrilling sensations. Signals from the bridge have indicated that the ship is on the range and all is in readiness to commence firing. The impressive blackness of the night is torn asunder by the same lurid blast observed when the first ship opened fire. Being closer to the explosion, one is rather startled by the sudden hot rush of air which causes you to blink and gasp for breath, though you may have been determined to follow that shot in its flight to the target.

Adjusting yourself to the shock and again picking up the target with your binoculars, you see again a tiny hole in the screen and a mountain of white foam behind the target raft. Shots follow in rapid succession, and you make the discovery that attached to each shell is a burning tracer, or fuse, which is used in night firing in order that the flight of the shell may be followed by the eye. This sputtering, reddish light seems to float gracefully through the air and disappear behind the target, and when one has learned where to look for it next it is discovered seemingly miles in the air and appears to be moving so slowly that it might be mistaken for a star. But upon being watched closely it resembles more nearly a toy balloon and seems to be just as innocent. The disappearing shell makes a roar like escaping steam, which continues for many seconds after the discharge of the gun.

At the completion of this run the firing of our ship for that night is over. But the pyrotechnic display occasioned by the firing of the other ships is too fascinating to leave until the entire division has completed its practice for that night.

The procedure the next night for the port guns is practically the same, though its repetition loses none of its weird fascination, even for senior officers who have witnessed it many times.

IN THE SHIP'S SICK BAY.

Having had two decidedly strenuous nights of hard work occasioned by the firing of the 5-inch guns, the ship's company has nothing but routine duties to occupy its mind and time while in preparation for the day firing of the 12-inch guns in the turrets. While lying leisurely at anchor, an opportunity is offered to continue your temporarily suspended trip of exploration. The sick bay is visited. Efficiency of equipment and personnel is obvious. From the construction of the isolation room for contagious diseases to a most interesting electric probe (which, when used in locating a bullet in a wound, indicates in the telephone receiver-like ear piece attached to the surgeon's head by a resounding click that the bullet has been touched), ingenuity and application are apparent.

The engine room, with its turbines, and the fire room, with its boilers, under which may be burned either coal or oil, could be made the subject of a story itself. The storerooms, containing thousands of different items of supplies and equipment for which the the paymaster is responsible, suggest a wonderfully well

CRUDE BUT EFFECTIVE LAUNDRY METHODS.